

# THE PERILS OF LITERAL TRANSLATION

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It is well known that all languages have their own peculiar idioms. Reckless translation into foreign languages can sometimes have unfortunate, and sometimes funny, consequences. This fact is amply illustrated by the following story. An engineer had once devised a program which would enable him to translate between any two languages on earth. He described his program at a technical meeting, and in order to demonstrate its power, he had a computer loaded with the new program. After describing the program, he asked the audience to suggest a phrase for him to ask the computer to translate. Someone suggested the phrase "out of sight, out of mind". The engineer punched this into the machine, and then asked someone else in the audience to suggest a language that he might translate to. Someone suggested Russian. He loaded that into the machine, punched the Go button, and waited. The machine whirled for a few moments, and finally announced that the translation was such-and-such (in Russian).

This was wonderful, but nobody at the session understood Russian and they didn't know whether the translation was a good one or not. They sat around wondering what could be done, and finally someone said, "Why don't we feed that Russian back into the machine, and ask it to translate back into English?" Everybody agreed that this was a wonderful idea. They did precisely that, and when the machine finally stopped whirring, it revealed the startling fact that the English-to-Russian-to-English translation of "out of sight, out of mind" was "blind idiot".

This story can also be told using the original phrase "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak". Two translations later, this turns out to be "the whiskey is fine, but the meat has gone bad".

Still another story concerns a technical report which had been written in English and then translated into Russian, and finally back into English again. The engineer who got hold of this double translation was mystified by a particular sentence: "In this case, a water goat can be employed". The engineer couldn't understand what a water goat was. After much investigation, he finally located the fellow

who had done the original translation, and it turned out that the original statement was, "In this case, a hydraulic ram can be employed".

Martin Gardner, in his column in *Scientific American*, tells this story about computer attempts to understand the phrase "Time flies like an arrow". The computer must first decide which is the noun in the sentence, which is the verb, and so on. The first meaning that the computer may decide on may be that the first word "time" is the noun, the second word "flies" is the verb, and the rest is a prepositional phrase. The meaning in this case will be the one that is most commonly associated with the phrase. On the other hand, the computer may decide that the first word is a verb and that the second word is a noun. In other words, the word "time" is a verb in the same sense as it is when we speak of "to time a runner". Now the meaning will be that one should time flies in the same manner that one times an arrow. Still another interpretation is possible; there exists a class of insects known as "time flies" with peculiar gustatory habits (they like to eat arrows). Thus, we can get three different meanings out of this one simple phrase. In similar vein, Dmitri Borgmann in Beyond Language (Scribner's, 1967) suggests that the innocent-looking phrase "let your hair down" is open to four different interpretations.

The lack of finesse in literal translation is shown in the following story. Heinz, although moderately happy in Germany, wanted to obtain a job in the United States. To aid him in his search, he bought several New York newspapers and discovered a job he was particularly anxious to pursue. He wrote a letter of inquiry in German, and obtained the services of a friend who spoke English "real good" to translate it into English. The result is shown below:

Dear Highly Regarded Lady:

I am writing this letter to answer to the plea which you yesterday published and I in the newspaper saw. The work that you described have seems very pleasant to be. I believe that my experience is what you are seeking. Always I have felt that I very happy this work to do would be. I hope that this letter is an indication of my interest and that I the honor you in person soon to meet will have.

I am full of high attentions,

Heinz